

**REPRESENTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:
EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE PERFORMANCE OF MALE
IDENTITY IN DOCUMENTARY FILM**

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Compelled and partly inspired by the flurry of change spawned by second-wave feminisms and several other prominent social movements across North America from the 1960s onwards, the status of men, for a long time deemed natural and incontestable, became subject, in unprecedentedly explicit terms, to an increasingly consistent scrutiny. The study of masculinity, a category once unmarked and thus (apparently) unproblematic, gradually emerged as a legitimate concern to be pursued -with widely differing objectives and results- both in popular culture and in academia. The growing amount of scholarship on masculinity today not only confirms the existence of a robust general interest in matters concerning gender, it also indicates the desire to make up for the perceived lack of a more specific analysis of this issue within already established disciplines like women's, gender, or gay and lesbian studies.

A privileged domain in this undertaking is the representation of gendered and sexual identity in all forms of cultural production, 'high' and 'low'; this means in practice an immensely wide range of texts -in the broadest sense of the term-, from literature to advertising. Among the visual arts, film has, ever since the birth of cinema, attracted its fair share of attention. Within this area, gender-based analyses of fiction film abound, but that is not yet the case with documentary -one of many examples of the comparative critical neglect of non-fiction film.

It is my contention that documentary provides a particularly fertile ground, so far underexploited, for an analysis of cultural portrayals of gender identity. The pervasive influence of what is generally termed poststructuralism in the humanities –a development roughly parallel to the social movements alluded to above, and continuing into the present– has pointed towards a broader questioning of traditional (Western) notions of truth, history, reason and the self, and has contributed crucially to the understanding and revision of documentary’s epistemological status. It would therefore be interesting to survey the challenges to dominant, canonical documentary forms, even to the whole documentary enterprise, derived from such reconsiderations.

This article will first present an account, by necessity brief and incomplete, of the most significant contemporary theoretical work on gender, with an emphasis on the more recent emergence and consolidation of masculinity studies and its contributions –actual or potential– to the gender debate. It will then proceed to a survey of prominent views on representation (and on the so-called crisis of representation especially) in documentary studies, as well as of some remarkable intersections of documentary film and the representation of gender and sexual identity to date. The remainder of the essay will attempt to bring these two strands to practice in a discussion of the representation and critique of several forms of contemporary hegemonic (white, heterosexual, male) masculinity through a close reading of three ‘documentary’ films, all by white male directors: Rob Reiner’s *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), Peter Lynch’s *Project Grizzly* (1996), and Henry A. Rubin & Dana A. Shapiro’s *Murderball* (2005).

Once an extensive academic consensus has been established on the social, cultural and political construction of gender, it is possible to examine the kinds of masculinity illustrated in these texts as ideologically-charged performative iterations of gender. *This Is Spinal Tap* is a clever example of that (arguably) hybrid genre commonly known as *mockumentary*: a fiction film that parodies documentary conventions, the rock documentary in this case. The film follows the members of a British heavy-metal band on their American comeback tour and can be read as a satire of the hypermasculine codes prevalent in popular music. The Canadian documentary *Project Grizzly*, about self-described “bear-researcher” Troy Hurtubise’s quest for a second, perhaps final confrontation with the animal, shares with Reiner’s film a detached view of hyperbolic masculinity and some degree of formal reflexivity. Finally, an analysis of the Oscar-nominated *Murderball*, a somewhat more conventional movie about the USA quadriplegic rugby team, could throw some light on the complexities and crises of modern American masculinity. All three films share, in varying degrees, the following elements: the depiction of some form of what is generally regarded as an exaggerated, hyperbolic masculinity and the relatively open (but not necessarily self-conscious) display of its highly prosthetic character; the

idealisation (with or without an accompanying demystification) of male bonding and the all-male group as an appropriate site for the expression of an allegedly essential male identity, where women are often figured as intrusive or downright disruptive, with the exception of those who agree to play an accessory, supporting or subordinate role; the remarkable but not exclusive use of the observational mode and the partially related effacement of authorial presence and intervention (the case of *This Is Spinal Tap* being slightly more complex in this respect);¹ and the particular significance of failure both as a spectre that constantly haunts the performance of masculinity and as an organising narrative principle, as well as the frequent overlapping of the two functions. Furthermore, the operations of national anxiety, underscoring traditional links between manhood and national formations, can be said to have a certain import in the three films selected, but this is most noticeable in *Project Grizzly* and, with heightened intensity, in *Murderball*.

It is not my intention to offer these texts as in any way perfect or even landmark examples of an ultimately effective, politically sound deconstruction of white heterosexual male masculinity –or as decisive subversive interventions in the debate around gender identity–, but as instances of the growing critical visibility and interrogation of the category and, most importantly, as powerful illustrations of the particular zones of anxiety, liminality and tension that contribute to its fundamental instability. Finally, a caveat: although I am aware of the traditional and persistent privilege accorded to the study of men –mostly in the guise of a neutral, universalised human(ist) entity– and of the theoretical as well as practical conflicts posed by an exaggerated emphasis on white male masculinity within the field, I believe there is still wide space for an examination of the fault lines of contemporary Western notions and displays of precisely this variant on which the whole masculine project, as a performatively maintained socio-historical construction, finds itself at risk.

1. This article follows Nichols's widely used typology of documentary modes of representation (latest revision in Nichols 2001: 99-138). Conventional popular notions of documentary film tend to associate the form as a whole with the rhetorical and didactic elements of exposition (authoritative voice-over narration, presentation and elaboration of an argument, evidentiary editing), but the actual range of documentary expression is obviously much wider. The six modes Nichols identifies are: poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative. The observational mode, whose emergence was closely related to developments in portable camera and sound recording equipment during the late 50s, emphasises an allegedly more direct, spontaneous and unobtrusive engagement with the historical world and has often led to claims of unmediated access to reality. It is this deceptive realist aesthetic that other documentary modes –most notably, reflexive and performative– aim to counter.

1. Gender, in Theory: An Overview

It is hard to overstate the part played by second-wave feminisms in the gradual revisions of gender that were carried out in the second half of the twentieth century. A considerable amount of early feminist explorations of the gender order within this period focused primarily on the exposure and dissection of the mechanisms of patriarchy and on the positive re-evaluation of an allegedly distorted female identity. Accordingly, much effort was directed towards the denunciation of an oppressive system that creates and maintains unequal roles for women through the social and cultural reproduction of highly constrictive notions of femininity. Although proving politically useful in a number of ways, this approach became increasingly criticised for its totalising tendencies and eventually recognised as a form of reverse essentialism that kept the traditional binary model of gender identity firmly in place. Among the crucial contributions to this shift towards an anti-essentialist feminism were the demands for a greater attention to difference/s -as opposed to a hypothetically monolithic female condition- on the part of those groups within the movement (lesbians, women of colour) that claimed to experience additional forms of oppression, and the irregular but steady incorporation of several forms of poststructuralist thought into feminist theory.

It was precisely the growing currency of poststructuralism -and its persistent critique of liberal humanist ideas of a coherent, unified self- that would then lead to yet more radical theoretical reconfigurations of gender, promptly formalised with the emergence and development in the 1990s of the critical apparatus now commonly known as queer theory (Sullivan 2003: 37-39). Its proponents, like many gender theorists in other fields, insist on regarding gender and sexual identity as discursively constituted, and therefore contingent, discontinuous, fractured, multiple, fluid. This position enjoys wide academic acceptance, although it may at times lead to an unquestioning and vague celebration of the subversive possibilities of this queer subjectivity, with rather less notice given to the practical everyday effects of the heteronormative gender order and the need for more sustained, organised forms of resistance.

Judith Butler's work aptly illustrates the confluence of feminist theory, oppositional practice, and the impact on both of poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity. Among other things, she has contributed to a substantial destabilisation of the sex/gender distinction -one of the benchmarks of much contemporary feminist thought- by reversing the temporal, causal logic that used to bind the two terms, thus collapsing the boundaries. Butler (1990: 147) calls into question the usefulness of "the identity categories often presumed to be foundational to feminist politics". Her notion of gender performativity lays out -and lays bare- the mechanisms whereby the performance and attributes of gender "effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (141; see also Butler 1993: 95); the practice of gender parody exposes the

fictional status of gender identity, which turns out to be, in her famous phrase, “an imitation without an origin” (Butler 1990: 138). The reality of gender –its ontology– thus manifests itself as illusory, radically inseparable from its enunciation and performance.

Feminism’s comprehensive exposure of the workings of patriarchy and the challenges posed by the movement’s accompanying projects of gender reform galvanised men’s responses to the existing gender system –from reactionary to progressive (Connell 1995: 204-224; Gardiner 2002: 4)– and resulted in the broadening cultural attention to the components and determinants of the thus far underexamined category of masculinity. While much of this early literature, popular and otherwise, may have been simplistic, uninformed and sometimes unambiguously regressive, Newton (2002: 179) identifies a turning point in the late 1980s towards the creation of a respectable academic discipline that would carry out a serious, systematic analysis of men and masculinities. This comparatively recent interest in masculinity and its fragile construction inevitably entails a re-centering of the male subject, and has consequently been regarded with suspicion or reticence from various quarters. Solomon-Godeau (1995: 71), for instance, rejects the presumed novelty of the much-publicised contemporary crisis of masculinity –“there is ample evidence to suggest that there never is, never was, an unproblematic, a natural, or a crisis-free variant”– and questions the actual efficacy of a field of study that has so far proved unable to adequately address the ravages of patriarchy:

While I suppose I am willing to grant that the current interrogation of masculinity is a useful project, perhaps even an index of positive social change, feminists and men who support feminism should be careful to distinguish a shared emancipatory project from intellectual masturbation. More disturbingly, the very appeal of approaching masculinity as a newly discovered discursive object may have less to do with the “ruination” of certain masculinities in their oppressive and subordinating instrumentalities than with a new accommodation of their terms—an expanded field for their deployment—in which the fundamentals do not change. (Solomon-Godeau 1995: 76)

This explains the frequently acknowledged need for masculinity studies to incorporate and actively pursue an openly progressive political project (Adams and Savran 2002: 6-7), and the careful attentiveness to feminism and feminist theory observed in several anthologies and prominent individual works on the issue (see May and Strikwerda 1992; Connell 1995 and 2000; Gardiner 2002). Gardiner (2002: 12-15, 23-24), in particular, spells out the mutual benefits of an explicit alliance between feminist theory and the study of masculinity, which stresses the fact that the latter is heavily indebted to the insights of immediately previous work on gender, and has developed along similar lines. Indeed, most

thoughtful scholarship on masculinity automatically assumes the category as ineluctably multiple –hence the more appropriate reference to masculinities–, constituted and modified in myriad (and multidirectional) ways by its intersection with structures like class, race, sexuality, nationality, age; it is also mindful of the particular power relations that regulate the interactions among existing kinds of masculinity, and their operation within the larger gender system, in different socio-historical contexts; finally, contemporary theoretical work on masculinities usually accepts and works on the basis of the performative character of all such constructs, as put forward by Judith Butler.

There is still, however, some resistance in the field to accept the full implications of much of its own theoretical apparatus. A case in point is the virtual effacement of the female in most discussions of masculinity. Both Sedgwick (1995: 12-13) and Halberstam (1998: 2) have drawn attention to the need for a systematic investigation into the structural challenges posed by female masculinity. In this sense, Connell's (2000: 29) rather strained insistence on a clear, ultimate link between masculinity and men –“Masculinity *refers to* male bodies (sometimes directly, sometimes symbolically and indirectly), but is not *determined* by male biology. It is, thus, perfectly logical to talk about masculine women or masculinity in women's lives, as well as masculinity in men's lives”–, together with his neglect of female masculinity in an earlier monograph whose title (*Masculinities*) and scope left less room for excuse, can be taken as fairly representative of the discipline's failure to wholly acknowledge and articulate the performative nature of gender. It is also indicative of the peculiar dissociation faced –embraced?– by masculinity studies, simultaneously presenting itself as a serious, committed and necessary discipline intent on identifying masculinity's illusions and possibly working to correct its most harmful effects, and recognising the only temporary, transitional character of the enterprise, and thus its eventual dissolution. After all, as Hopkins (1992: 197) cogently points out, there is little meaningful change to be expected “as long as masculinity is somehow viewed as an intrinsically appropriate feature of certain bodies”.

2. Representation: Gender and Documentary

The paramount social and cultural weight of all forms of representation is extensively acknowledged, then, by practitioners of gender studies, for whom discourse and language remain enormously popular objects of analysis and interrogation. In this context, representations are commonly understood not as mere elaborations, imaginative or otherwise, of pre-existing identities –nor as silent mirrors to an allegedly external reality–, but as powerful interventions into their constitution. Masculinity studies does not significantly deviate from this trend. Most of the anthologies surveyed explicitly recognise the significance of representation in the production, dissemination, validation and critique of different notions of

masculinity: Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995: 7), for example, emphasise “how [...] images can produce and ultimately reshape notions of the masculine”; Adams and Savran (2002: 153) similarly highlight “the role of representations in creating and sustaining changing cultural ideas about masculinity”; and Whitehead and Barrett (2005: 141) identify “media imagery” as one of the “key arenas which inform and constitute the public world of men”. They also include, in a more or less conspicuous fashion, writings that tackle the issue of masculinity and/in representation: there is a great number of individual essays that address such a link and it is not uncommon to actually find separate sections dedicated exclusively to the relationship between masculinity and representation.²

The absolute predominance of literature and film over other media in these accounts is easily explained by the cultural prestige and/or widespread exposure of these artistic forms. Fiction film, and most particularly Hollywood cinema, invites frequent and prolonged reflection; documentary film, on the other hand, has so far received scant attention, certainly nothing remotely approaching a thorough scrutiny. This seems to be, however, a rather general failing of gender studies as a whole. And though the situation is substantially improved in collections that address precisely gender and sexuality in relation to documentary film and video (see Holmlund and Fuchs 1997; Waldman and Walker 1999) –as well as in some documentary film theory (Nichols 1994; Bruzzi 2000)–, a strong impression remains that documentary studies is equally at fault for its long-standing disregard for gender matters and that a more sustained effort is needed to adequately redress the historical oversight.

There is a larger trend at work in this connection. Documentary’s apparent imperviousness, for a great part of its long history, to broad, solid ideological examination of its very form has been the source of much wonder. In the early 1980s, with documentary film theory still pretty much in its infancy, Bill Nichols (1981: 172) found it

odd that so much theoretical attention should go to those areas where the film itself (narrative, and now experimental film) at least calls attention to the fact of its being an illusion and so very little to documentary where the challenge of meeting this illusionism head on is greatest. It is only by examining how a series of sounds and images signify that we can begin to rescue documentary from the anti-theoretical, ideologically complicit argument that documentary-equals-reality, and that the screen is a window rather than a reflecting surface.

2. “Masculinity and Representation” in Berger, Wallis and Watson (1995); “Representations” in Adams and Savran (2002).

As a matter of fact, the rejection of documentary's unexamined epistemological assumptions –especially those of direct cinema, the form that would come to dominate the North American (mostly US) documentary landscape from the 60s onwards (Winston 1995: 203-204) and which usually claimed a privileged, unmediated access to reality and truth– was by then increasingly vocal. Waldman and Walker (1999: 6-11) sketch the prevalence, in the feminist film theory of the time, of the critique of realism after a brief embrace of conventional documentary forms on the part of the women's movement. The crisis and “exhaustion” of documentary, in both its observational and earlier expository modes, that took place in Canada during the 70s and 80s as described by Steven (1993: 21-22) were also highly symptomatic of the brewing shift of paradigm. The overhaul became widespread with the popularisation during the 80s of assorted postmodern attacks on grand narratives, in particular the Enlightenment project and its epistemological foundations; in other words, with the profound revision of the very notions of reason, truth, reality, objectivity and representation so historically crucial to the documentary enterprise. As Winston (1995: 243) succinctly noted, the “move to a postmodern scepticism throws the whole documentary idea into question”.

The response by the overwhelming majority of writers on documentary has combined a qualified acknowledgement of the import of such challenges with an insistence on the continuing legitimacy and usefulness of the documentary form, albeit in increasingly self-conscious, modified versions. Waugh's (1984: xix) was an early, remarkably forceful vindication: “the new documentary theory has never even threatened to dislodge documentary as an important and discrete arena of committed film practice”. Subsequent interventions in the debate have also attempted to downgrade the gravity of this apparent theoretical impasse, and so we have Nichols's (1991: 7) well-known assertion that “the separation between an image and what it refers to continues to be a difference that makes a difference”, or the balance sought between documentary's necessary narrativity (Nichols 1991: 107-115; Renov 1993: 2-7) and its decisive gestures towards *the* world, the one that affects us all, even if it is never more than “a shared, historical construct” (Nichols 1991: 109). The degree to which we actually do share that construct is still, of course, a matter of extraordinary contention.

Documentary's traditional claims to truth (usually understood as unique and readily accessible) have thus undergone considerable re-examination. Both Nichols (1994: 1-6) and Williams (1993: 11) emphasise the new documentary's preference for situated forms of knowledge which would generate non-totalising, strategic, relative truth/s –a move which simultaneously justifies and, again, guarantees the continuity of the genre:

It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that

construct competing truths –the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events. Yet too often this way of thinking has led to a forgetting of the way in which these films still are [...] documentaries –films with a special interest in the relation to the real, the ‘truths’ which matter in people’s lives but which cannot be transparently represented (Williams 1993: 13)

The transformation is evinced by the broad, steady flow in the last three decades towards a tighter incorporation of the issues of subjectivity, identity, and reflexivity to documentary film (Renov 2004: 197). It is also patent in the considerable inroads of subjectivity and gender thinking into documentary theory. Pertinent examples of this are Nichols’s expansion of his original typology of documentary modes (1991: 32-33) to include the performative (1994: 92-106), and Bruzzi’s contention (2000: 125) that “[p]erformance has always been at the heart of documentary filmmaking”, as well as her related (but not identical) notion of the performative documentary. These debates acquire a special significance for groups with a more precarious, conflict-ridden link to representation, that is, those that claim to have been historically under- or misrepresented (Rabinowitz 1994: 13). As far as gender and sexuality are concerned, both feminists and gay and lesbian activists found documentary useful for the deployment of new understandings of the political, and contributed to an enlargement of documentary’s thematic interests (Waugh 1984: xxvi; Nichols 1991: ix; Steven 1993: 23, 41), but also to a complex renegotiation of its terms.

Waugh (1997) finds, in his study of gay and lesbian documentary of the 1970s, a tension (also present in much feminist politics) between the need for “positive images”, usually conveyed in traditional realist form, and the more intricate problematising of identity carried out by several kinds of performative documentary: “realism was adequate for mustering ourselves as an electoral minority, but for *real* change (as we used to say), ‘performance’ strategies were preferred” (1997: 114). This captures a turning point in the history of documentary filmmaking marked by the convergence of identity politics (with its multiple and sometimes conflicting agendas) and poststructuralist-inflected understandings of both identity and representation. Waldman and Walker (1999: 13), in turn, assert their belief that both positions can be reconciled, that it is possible, as they put it, to find “a way of conserving the baby of vocalized struggle while draining out the bathwater of pseudotransparency”.

Work with a clear focus on gender and sexuality in documentary film and video has been abundant ever since, although perhaps not too widespread or notorious for the most part. There are, however, some emblematic, highly successful examples which illustrate the ongoing modification of the dominant documentary canon and the unresolved tensions within the form. One of the most frequently discussed films in this respect is Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*

(1991). An examination –by an off-screen outsider– of the New York black/Latino drag ball subculture, this documentary exhibits, as has been already widely remarked (Rabinowitz 1994: 131-132; Bruzzi 2000: 156-157), a somewhat uneasy blending of conventional observational form and a theme and social actors that insist (albeit still ambivalently) on a performative conception of identity. In other words, there is not always a correspondence between the diversion from normative identity manifest in the subjects and actions depicted in the film and a similar critique of the very mechanism of representation –which might once more beg the question of documentary’s ultimate responsiveness and adaptability to such concerns. The number of documentaries which deal with masculinity in an explicit way is much more restricted, and these are often allied with various forms of progressive activism, such as Marlon Riggs’s controversial *Tongues Untied* (1989), an epitome of the performative mode of representation, and already a much-celebrated classic of documentary video, which problematised black gay identity in an unusually sophisticated way. It is not, however, characteristic of the overall picture and of the difficulties that surround the portrayal of masculinities in documentary film.

Normative (heterosexual, male) masculinity is indeed, strictly speaking, in no need of representation –the hegemonic white variant even less so. Its representation is always already ubiquitous, but for a long time it has also been, paradoxically, transparent, unmarked. Its potential susceptibility to open and judicious documentary inspection is further complicated by hegemonic masculinity’s historical investment in the documentary enterprise, a link that encompasses conventional epistemology and patriarchal rule:

The principle of universal reason, touchstone of post-Enlightenment thought, was massively facilitated by the growth and refinement of the nation-state during modernity’s two-hundred-year reign. It is here that one encounters the confluence of an incipient documentary project, particularly alive in the Soviet Union and Great Britain in the 1920s and 1930s, with the nation-building imperative of that age. The most ambitious documentary efforts have often coupled a zealotry for science and nation. (Renov 2004: 133-134).

The United States and Canada were not exceptions to this sweeping unifying impulse, facilitated by state-sponsored documentary filmmaking during crucial periods in their recent history. In this connection, one should not overlook documentary’s well-established status as one of the “discourses of sobriety” –“vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will”– identified by Nichols (1991: 3-4). Traditionally, then, documentary has not differed much from other areas of the cultural establishment in its ideological underpinnings and institutional practice, most of it clearly masculinist. The films analysed below portray masculine identities and male practices that tend to

straddle the relatively permeable boundaries between the hegemonic and the complicit (see Connell 1995: 77-80). They testify to the increased but still insufficient critical visibility of North American hegemonic masculinity, and remind us of the viability and potential effectiveness of an integrated reassessment of masculinity and documentary film.

3. *This is Spinal Tap*; Or, The Reality of Ineptitude and the Ineptitude of Reality

There's no way to promote something that doesn't exist.

(David St. Hubbins)

This Is Spinal Tap (1984) may at first strike as an odd choice for a discussion like this. It is, after all, most emphatically not a documentary film. Yet there seems to be a considerably widespread acceptance, within documentary studies, of the mockumentary form in general (Sánchez 2005: 85-86) and of this movie in particular –as suggested by its inclusion in certain accounts of non-fiction film (Grant and Sloniowski 1998). While the seemingly unproblematic accommodation of this form may be taken to accentuate the increasing, self-critical flexibility of the documentary genre, one must bear in mind that the mockumentary, as defined by Roscoe and Hight (2001: 49), remains a largely external threat, with the double-edged implications of such a category as regards the possible reach of its critique (186). As an avowedly fictional text, it can easily circumvent the predicaments of documentary's enduring investment in the real, but at the same time risks having any critical advances crucially checked by its very outsider status.

Actor Rob Reiner's feature-length directorial debut, the movie documents "legendary" British band Spinal Tap's hilariously disastrous American tour. It opens with documentarian Marty DiBergi (played by Reiner himself) introducing his film as an attempt to "to capture the sights, the sounds, the smells of a hard-working rock band on the road", in what constitutes an exaggerated replication of observational documentary's most fanciful claims. *This Is Spinal Tap* combines the merely observational with conventional concert footage, interviews, superimposed titles, photographs, and archival TV material of the band's musical past, all of them essential to the film's comedic success.³

An early exchange serves to make fun of the quirky workings of popular music mythology and its rampant clonism, and to hint at the band's rather muddled ontological status within the industry. David St. Hubbins (lead guitar and singer, played by Michael McKean) and Nigel Tufnel (lead guitar, played by

3. See Plantinga 1998 for a more detailed account of parodied intertexts and (rock-) documentary conventions.

Christopher Guest) recount how they joined up after leaving their respective initial groups, The Creatures and Lovely Lads. The resulting band, called The Originals, having learned of another group in the East End with that exact name, decides to turn into The New Originals; when the other band renames itself The Regulars, they consider they might as well go back to their first choice, “but what’s the point?” This scene implicitly raises an important issue that is emphasised all throughout the film: the inherent, obvious constructedness of commercial public identities. As Roscoe and Hight (2001: 120) indicate,

A significant feature of rockumentaries, which complicates th[e] naturalist argument [on which much documentary practice relies], is that they are recording events which are themselves constructed theatrical performances. [...] This places mock-rockumentaries in an interesting position of offering a parody or satire of an event or band or persona which is, to some extent, already acknowledged as a fictional construct.

Clips of the band’s previous musical incarnations –from “beat” to “psychedelic” (Roscoe and Hight 2001: 122)– suggest a morphing ability that is ultimately dependent on fluctuating, and sometimes rather arbitrary, market dynamics. They also underline the shifting standards of acceptable manhood (as culturally represented) and thus the category’s intrinsic contingency. The band’s (current) heavy metal phase is strenuously marked by the need to sustain a hypermasculine façade that seems quite at odds with the rather goofy, adolescent and unself-conscious masculinity of its most prominent members.⁴ The very fact that it *must* be sustained points to its inevitable performativity, here visually supported by the recurrent use of various props: rough hairstyle and make-up, phallic guitars, dark elaborate sets, and, in the infamous airport security scene, a cucumber wrapped in tinfoil that Derek Smalls (bass, played by Harry Shearer) is required to take out of his spandex trousers.

This peculiar prosthesis had already been noticeable in an earlier concert scene –stressed by one of the not infrequent crotch-level shots that betray the camera’s complicity with the band’s self-presentation and myth-making process (a general feature of rock documentaries)– and it reveals the fundamental role of hyperbolic masculinity in heavy metal’s imaginary and audience composition. As Nigel clumsily explains, “Really, they [the females] are quite fearful. That’s my theory. They see us on the stage, with tight trousers. We’ve got, you know, armadillos in our trousers. I mean, it’s really quite frightening, the size. And, and they, they run screaming”. Needless to say, macho posturing and aggressiveness

4. Indeed, the film’s greatest source of comedy, and the crisis that structures much of the narrative, is the band’s utter inability to live up to the expectations raised by their hypermasculine musical personae.

permeate all other areas of their broad masculinist performance: from misogynistic lyrics with barely concealed sexual innuendo –“Sex farm woman, I’m gonna mow you down / Sex farm woman, I’ll rake and hoe you down / Sex farm woman, don’t you see my silo rising high, high, high”– to grotesque displays of virtuosity (Plantinga 1998: 325). The band’s performance also reveals an unquestioning adherence to the music industry’s discourse of transnational competition and their yielding to the pressure to conquer foreign markets.

Gender-based conflict also figures as central to some of the band’s misfortunes. The proposed cover for the album they are promoting (*Smell the Glove*) is refused for being sexist and the company is forced to change it. More tellingly, the sudden appearance of David’s girlfriend, Jeanine Pettibone (June Chadwick), destabilises the band’s idealised all-male unit –aptly encapsulated in another song: “I don’t need a woman, I won’t take me no wife / I’ve got the rock and roll, and that’ll be my life”– and challenges managerial authority, eventually causing both Ian (the manager) and Nigel (who resents the divided attention of his childhood friend) to leave the group. Ian’s misogyny is remarkably candid: “I’m certainly not gonna co-manage with some girl [...] I am not managing [the band] with you or any other woman”. These and other examples constitute masculinity as a carefully enclosed territory that is nevertheless constantly endangered by outside forces. Hence the band members’ self-suppression of any remote deviation towards femininity and the features conventionally associated with it –for instance, when Nigel is playing a delicate piece on the piano and finally announces its projected title to be “Lick My Love Pump”, as if to immediately ward off any perceived departure from hyperbolic masculinity– and the sparse but unequivocal disparagement of homosexuality (Plantinga 1998: 328).

Charming as the film’s satire of hypermasculinity may be –in itself a pretty safe and limited undertaking–, any appreciation of the overall effectiveness of its critique should be heavily qualified. Jeanine’s portrayal is distinctively unflattering, and the movie is unambiguous about her inability to manage the band. Moreover, the male order is finally restored: Nigel reunites with the group and there is a suggestion that Ian has taken up management again. The film, however, opened the way to the derision of several forms of masculinism in the music industry, spawning a considerable gallery of imitators.⁵

5. *Fear of a Black Hat* (1992) is an extremely pertinent example. A fake documentary by fictional director Nina Blackburn, it applies *This Is Spinal Tap*’s lampooning method, almost down to its last detail, to (black) rap culture’s hyperbolic performance and celebration of masculinity. The targets of scorn here are predictably similar –male ineptitude, misogynistic attitudes, aggressive song titles and lyrics– and there are some striking parallels between the two movies. Consider, for instance, the phallic gun-showing scene that clearly references Nigel’s guitar exhibit in Reiner’s film, or the peculiarly sensitive “love song” written by one of the group’s members –“I want to make you mine, slap your fat behind, tie you down and make

The depth of *This Is Spinal Tap's* revision of documentary's claims on representation is also questionable. The mode employed in the film is admittedly never purely observational; its frequent steps in the direction of the interactive/participatory –DiBergi often appears on screen, band members and other subjects are routinely interviewed, the presence of the camera is directly acknowledged at several points– may perhaps suggest a more nuanced approach to the reality of the historical world. A case in point is DiBergi's rather more vigorous intervention –on Nigel's side– during the latter part of the film, which effectively breaks the illusions that sustain the traditional observational stance. But there is more interest in crafty, humorous imitation of documentary's most easily recognisable conventions than in any comprehensive undermining of its epistemological structure and supports. The point is nicely captured by Roscoe and Hight's placement (2001: 119-125) of *This Is Spinal Tap* –and possibly of the entire mock-rockumentary corpus– within the first, most innocuous degree (“parody”) of their three-tier mock-documentary schema (68-75).⁶

Here it may be appropriate to consider the pervasiveness of self-referentiality, extensively surveyed by Dunne (1992), in what he calls the “hypermediated world of American popular culture” (1992: 161). While Dunne himself refrains from any extended discussion of its ideological and epistemological implications, it becomes apparent that the phenomenon as a whole rarely ventures, or aims, beyond the thrill of recognition and the confidence of guaranteed commercial self-perpetuation. There might be some substance, then, to Doherty's (2003: 24) characterisation of the mockumentary as “at heart a soothing genre. It repays a lifetime of arid channel surfing with an oasis of cool attitude and flatters spectators with assurances of their media sophistication and oh-so-wry sensibility”.

4. Going to Meet the Man: The Beast Without in *Project Grizzly*

The wife says I'm nuts; I talk to things, they become real.
(Troy Hurtubise)

If *This Is Spinal Tap* parodies documentary codes from the confines of fiction, *Project Grizzly* (1996) partially reverses the perspective. A National Film Board of Canada (NFB) production, this highly unconventional documentary portrays a man's prolonged obsession with grizzly bears as he prepares for a much sought-after repeat encounter. The film effects a parodic deployment of various fiction

you whine, I want you to scratch my itch, and be my bitch, cause I love you girl” –that supposedly manifests “his whole vulnerability”.

6. The other two degrees, in order of potential subversiveness, are critique and deconstruction. Parody, as these authors argue (2000: 100), often amounts to simply an “innocent' appropriation” of documentary aesthetics.

film generic conventions and popular culture narratives, registers the fictionalisation of reality and the realisation of fiction, and generally disrupts the already loose boundaries that attempt to separate/install the two domains. Peter Lynch's film also radically departs from the customary institutional preference for works aimed at public education and socio-political utility, veering instead towards sheer spectacle (Longfellow 2003: 197-198).

Troy Hurtubise is a scrap-metal worker from North Bay, Ontario, who has dedicated the last seven years of his life to "grizzly research", the professed purpose of which is the potentially fatal re-enactment of his previous traumatic confrontation with a bear. Both the details of this episode in Hurtubise's past and the motivation that drives his present quest are at first intentionally obscure: "It just happened because it happened, and, in that the bear didn't kill me, I've been on its trail ever since". In preparation for the event, he builds a bulky armoured suit, the Ursus Mark (now in its sixth model), which he patiently tests in all sorts of extreme ways. The enterprise is routinely shrouded in pseudo-scientific language -Hurtubise speaks gravely of his "research team" and at one point suggests there has been some kind of consultation with university experts- but at the same time it takes on almost supernatural, mythic dimensions. The movie's opening shots show a desolate, imposing landscape, and Hurtubise slowly emerging out of the woods to relay his memories to the camera. In his story, the grizzly -wholly personified (and idealised) in the figure of what he calls "the Old Man"- becomes a site for the projection of Troy's psychological and emotional anxieties.

His relationship with the bear is articulated in characteristically masculine terms, within the framework of an exclusively male ritual of power in which the young and the old vie for authority. The exact same rhetoric is at work when Troy explains why he does not bring his father on his expeditions: "Too many chiefs. My father likes to be in command too. So when I go out with my father, it's always like you're pitting against each other". From this moment onwards, then, this strand of the Oedipal narrative that inflects Troy's project becomes explicit, its haunting force rendered even greater by his father's total absence from the film; the unresolved conflict is thus effectively displaced "into [the grizzly's] territory". This interpretation -the projected, largely specular character of Troy's desired confrontation- has already been suggested by the editing on two separate occasions, in illustrational stock footage where instead of, say, a lone menacing bear, it is two bears fighting (or ready to fight) each other that we are shown.

As that example indicates, despite the film's strong impression of detachment and delegated control -it completely eschews, for instance, voice-over narration and on-screen authorial presence, and appears to grant observation a prominent place-, Lynch makes good use of all other means at his disposal to structure the

material and, more important, to actively convey his own reading of Troy's mission and persona. For one thing, the actions observed are, in fact, hardly spontaneous:

The film –and this is, perhaps, its biggest deviation from classical conceptions of documentary– is fully narrative, interventionist, and self-reflexive. Not only are numerous sequences obviously staged, but the principal dramatic event, Hurtubise's would-be encounter with a grizzly in the foothills of the Rockies, is deliberately choreographed by the film production, which subsidizes and arranges the transport of Hurtubise, his posse of seven men, and a small arsenal of guns and ammunition to Alberta. (Longfellow 2003: 199)

It is of course Troy's peculiar figure that serves as the crucial inspiring agent of Lynch's cinematic manipulations and critical commentary. His exuberant self-presentation –his attire, poses, gestures, demeanour– and the steady allusion to relevant texts (mostly visual) and myths of the US popular imagination give us the measure of an avowedly hypermediated identity –in Longfellow's (2003: 201) words, “a walking pastiche of American popular culture, if there ever was one”. His childhood memories –spurred by his mother's recollections of Troy's early penchant for destruction (shooting light bulbs off a Christmas tree, building a volcano)– mingle with episodes of *The Brady Bunch*; his bear-proof suit borrows from the hardened 80s masculinity of *Robocop*'s cyborg policeman –as Lynch makes clear in the dexterous juxtaposition at the abandoned drive-in movie theatre; and the 1994 epic Western drama *Legends of the Fall*, together with a plethora of unnamed, more classical examples of the genre, infuses much of Troy's sense of quest and personal fate.⁷

Lynch's ability to play on the tenuousness of Hurtubise's link with the substance of such cultural references is perhaps most evident on the aural plane. The use of militaristic music and Western-style melodies as accompaniment to Troy's antics throughout the film underscores, without being exceedingly intrusive, the ironic distance between the over-assertive, inflated masculinity of his cinematic and other cultural exemplars, and his own deficient, tragically out-of-place performance –an unbridgeable divide that has an obvious correlation on the national scale. By commenting on a type of mediation that bears all the marks of cultural colonialism, *Project Grizzly* implicitly raises for consideration the disparity between the United States as an imperialist superpower capable of large-scale ideological export and Canada as a nation permanently at the margins of empire, and asserts, if not the authority to completely transcend the former's

7. *Moby Dick* is another obvious cultural allusion, somewhat apart from the more popular references and intertexts, and less explicitly developed. In any case, the idea of Troy as a latter-day Ahab proves here just as anachronistic and ludicrous as the other parallels.

overwhelming influence, at least some potential for parodic revision and undermining (Longfellow 2003: 199-200, 203). The opposition is, to a certain extent, also important to understanding what could be regarded as an almost schizophrenic approach to nature that combines notions of the Western frontier myth (of particular, though not exclusive, import to the US imaginary) with echoes of the less intrepid, quintessentially Canadian garrison mentality –both variations of a single masculinist theme: civilisation and nature united by a logic of domination–, all of which is complicated, in Troy’s eclectic fashion, by a certain appropriation of Native American/Canadian spirituality.⁸

As shown in the film, Hurtubise’s endeavour moves hesitantly between defiance and submission. His unwavering determination to challenge the “Old Man” superficially conforms to the courageous, tough-minded, rugged individualism of the frontier mythology, of someone who is ready to confront the wilderness and come out victorious. But the whole idea crumbles away when we consider that Troy’s suit, a rigid, clumsy 7’2” monster that can barely move, will not possibly allow for much beyond mere survival, the ability to simply stand the bear’s attack and escape relatively unscathed. (Protection from the outside also seems to have been the principle behind his father’s greatest project –the building of an Iroquoian village–, “a monument in [Troy’s] mind” to which he explicitly links his own.)

The ambivalence is further illustrated by Troy’s narration of a recurring dream, one that has him falling into a “black abyss” where paralysing fear mixes with attraction: “I wanna go down deeper ’cause I wanna explore”. This vision alone may call to mind Troy’s earlier depiction of the grizzly’s eyes as “little fathomless pits”, and Hurtubise immediately brings the connection to the surface: he believes that dream has, in the past, invariably anticipated bad luck (which evinces a form of superstition that would seem at odds with the pretended scientific character of the project) and forebodes now, the medicine man claims, a deadly outcome to his current enterprise; “but he says [...] that’s a good way to die”, and Troy himself appears to relish the prospect.⁹ Hurtubise also consistently refers to his suit as “she” and “good girl”, providing excellent

8. Indeed, the film also plays out the East/West divide within Canada’s own national imagination and their contrasting myths of encounter with the land.

9. This particular scene is even more significant when considered against a similar reference, later in the film, in which Troy recalls the identically phrased warning of a *fictional* Native Indian: “You gotta have a sense of humour. I mean, the worst that can happen is you can die, and as in *Legends of the Fall* the chief said ‘It’s a good way to die’”. While it is entirely possible that the medicine man consulted by Hurtubise (whom we know nothing about) did in fact convey to him that exact meaning in interpreting his dream, the film’s inclusion of this similitude nonetheless reinforces the impression of a remarkable epistemological confusion that Lynch, tellingly, never attempts to disentangle.

fodder -to those so inclined- for a psychoanalytic reading of his quest as a feminised, masochistic fantasy.

The film touches as well on the conflicting demands of male bonding and married life, and inspects the importance of the former in the maintenance of normative notions of male subjectivity. Hurtubise, who is “allowed out every second night”, finds in the all-male enclave a space of temporary freedom from everyday responsibilities and a springboard for excitement that might assuage his “biggest fear [...] monotony, being bored, being average”. As several scenes manifest, the sentiment is shared by his friends and crew, one of whom explains his war experience in those terms: “One of the reasons why I went to Vietnam, I s’pose, was for the fun travel and adventure, and to get a feel for what it was like in combat”. He then goes on to relate the particulars of a near-suicidal game (“outrun hand grenade”) he and fellow soldiers used to play for the sake of “adrenaline rush”. The military analogy is highly appropriate in a film that portrays a form of masculinity based on recklessness and hyperbole and whose occasional extravagance may conceal the widespread social acceptance it actually enjoys.

Troy’s ultimate failure to stage and consummate the encounter -quite tellingly, on account of the suit’s preposterous inappropriateness to the terrain- highlights the crucially ambiguous function of non-accomplishment in his narrative. Troy’s dream retains its grip as long as it is not fulfilled and becomes, for that very reason, “what keeps [him] going”, just as masculine ideals -far from being an effect of fixed natural embodiment- remain perpetually, necessarily elusive, never completely attainable. Therein lies their resilience. *Project Grizzly* reveals masculine performance as constant and constantly lacking. As we are properly reminded in another scene -Troy, in front of a mirror, shaving with a huge bowie knife (the film’s most phallic prosthesis, together with the gun)-, the maintenance of normative masculinity is, indeed, “a delicate operation”.

5. *Murderball* and the Rewards of Unabashed Mastery

We’re not going for a hug, we’re going for a fucking gold medal.
(Scott Hogsett)

The very recent *Murderball* (2005) provides a fairly compelling indication of the difficulties encountered by the (critical) representation of hegemonic masculinity at the present juncture and can be used, I believe, as a template for the assessment of its immediate and long-term challenges. While the film illustrates many of the burdens, trials and tribulations of normative white masculinity in contemporary North American culture, it does not sufficiently problematise them, often working instead, as we shall see, towards hasty, conveniently facile solutions. Nor does the film dig much deeper into epistemological ground. *Murderball* is not

openly concerned with the problems of documentary representation, and, despite its relatively successful exploitation of a number of recognisable narrative patterns and codes associated mostly with fiction film, the emphasis is not on reflexivity or the potential for productive epistemological equivocation, but primarily on heightened emotional, dramatic impact. Furthermore, and unlike the two films discussed previously, *Murderball* is utterly devoid of satiric intent.

Through the organising prism of professional quadriplegic rugby, the film –co-directed by second-time documentarian Henry A. Rubin and journalist Dana A. Shapiro and partly made in conjunction with a 2002 article for the racy men’s magazine *Maxim*– offers valuable glimpses into the lives of men who would appear to have a rather complicated relationship to hegemonic masculinity. As Connell (2000: 189) accurately notes, commercial competitive sport is a crucial vehicle “for the promotion of dominant forms of masculinity” and its use “as the dominant symbol of hegemonic masculinity appears to be on the rise globally” (65); it is also a site where masculine performance is consistently and conspicuously material, its marked bodily dimension making “gender [...] vulnerable when the performance cannot be sustained –for instance, as a result of physical disability” (Connell 1995: 54).

It is precisely the radical disavowal of disability that allows most of the men in the film to reclaim their sense of masculinity and, by common extension, of personhood itself.¹⁰ The first scenes indicate the pervasiveness of resentment and aggressively defensive attitudes; it is evident in Mark Zupan’s nonchalant willingness to fight (disabled and able-bodied guys alike) –“What, you’re not gonna hit a kid in a chair? Fucking hit me, I’ll hit you back!”–, in the players’ forceful rejection of stereotypes of the disabled as weak and pitiful, or in Andy Cohn’s casual comment that the mobility impairment in his hands make them particularly suitable as “spatulas for pancakes or [for] fucking people off”. The mechanism at work in examples like these could perhaps be described as one of masculine overcompensation in the face of limiting conditions, but one should be careful not to assign undue weight to this explanation. A broader social trend is suggested when one of his high-school friends confidently asserts that Zupan always was “an asshole”, and the causes for the present disability of some of the players –which include car accidents, one of them alcohol-related, and a fist fight– are also very telling in this respect.

10. A different perspective –one that is probably representative of the early stages of rehabilitation– is provided by Keith Cavill, tellingly the only major character in the film who is not yet involved in quad rugby. He painfully recognises the importance of the bodily dimension of identity and the challenges disability poses to its integrity: “When you go down to that gym, you realise how much you’re broken down. You’re really almost at an infant’s level. [...] I can’t even make a firm grip with my hand to present myself”.

In this context, the case against the negative effects of competitive sports that use the male body for different degrees of violent spectacle –and which constitute “a major threat to men’s health” (Connell 2000: 189)– is further complicated by the fact that in wheelchair rugby that body is, to a considerable extent, already wounded, verging on numbness, and therefore an adequate surface for extreme ideological inscription. Whatever social concern (arguably pretty faint) there may be with bodily aggression and harm in traditional mainstream sport is thus here radically diminished. The history and particulars of murderball –as the game was originally called– are, however, of limited significance to our discussion, and they occupy a minimal portion of the film itself; suffice it to say, then, that it is as physically brutal as its mainstream counterpart.

Of rather more interest are the mentality and values behind the sport, and what they can reveal about the larger culture. Among the sport’s most highly regarded functions is that of enabler of homosocial bonding and the proud expression of male prowess. Competitiveness is exalted here in a relentless, all-consuming drive for unequivocal domination. The wheelchair, often taken as a shameful mark of impotence, is deftly transformed into a weapon, and draws grandiose comparisons with filmic exemplars of militant virility (*Mad Max*, *Gladiator*). The court where the game is played frequently becomes, in turn, a theatre for the representation of national/ist anxieties; these are evident, for instance, in the pervasive resentment at the 2002 World Championship towards US arrogance and their continued dominance in this sport.

Conflicts around nationhood and competition are mostly encapsulated in the person of Portuguese-born Joe Soares, coach of Team Canada and former US quad rugby player. Soares’s bitter departure from Team USA and his unremitting struggle for victory accentuate the tensions inherent in the logic of competitive sport, and unleash the paranoid rhetoric of border anxiety, espionage and treason that helps perpetuate a national imaginary.¹¹ At one point he is flippantly compared to Benedict Arnold –emblematic traitor figure in American history– and the accusation recurs at other times in equally explicit terms (“How does it feel to betray your country, man?”). Soares’s responses cover a rather limited range: from silent complicity in that discourse to a half-hearted effort to refuse its most serious implications by sensibly reminding his accusers that it is, after all, just a sport they are talking about. As the film repeatedly shows, not everyone is ready to agree on this last point, and some players seem to take slight

11. The reference to this episode brings up the issue of masculinity’s strained relationship with age, an element too often ignored in studies of gender. A female Team USA manager concisely captures the link, in very pragmatic terms: “In ‘96 Joe was the man. (...) Unfortunately his speed started going down, he became older, so he got cut”.

affronts to heart –to wit, Mark Zupan: “If Joe was on the side of the road on fire, I wouldn’t piss on him to put it out”.

Examples of cocky boastfulness and displays of masculine bravado –many of them reminiscent of *Spinal Tap’s* immaturity– are predictably copious throughout the film and serve to heighten awareness of the performative character of the hypermasculine identity they attempt to salvage. The performance on court is remarkably elaborate: ritual chanting, battle cries, defiant posturing, threatening looks. Manhood is figured as an incremental achievement, an imprecise quality to be approximated through adequate feats and gestures, and one that is easy to lose –this is what enables Soares to taunt Zupan with suggestions of his not being “man enough”. It goes without saying that masculinity’s self-conscious public exhibition carries on well beyond the sporting arena, and the filmmakers offer engrossing instances of its off-court performance.

Not surprisingly, concerns over the capacity for sexual activity receive lavish attention. Its relevance to male subjectivity is grotesquely summarised by Scott Hogsett’s wisecrack, “I’d rather be able to grab my meat than grab a toothbrush”. Cohn labels his first sexual act after the accident “a very great moment in [his] life” and the recovery of sexual potency is officially recognised as an important part of rehabilitation.¹² More remarkable, yet still perfectly consistent with the operations of patriarchy, are the occasional but nevertheless enthusiastic female celebrations of active male sexuality:¹³ Hogsett recounts having an erection while being bathed by a nurse who apparently “got so excited that [he] got a woodie” that she ran to tell his mother. Heterosexuality is taken for granted, and its boundaries are carefully, if at times semi-facetiously, policed. There is a truly puzzling scene where a player is mocked by some of his team-mates for not liking girls with “big tits”, preferring instead athletic women; his equally perplexing response –“I’m ok with my sexuality”– gives some indication of how restricted and meaningless their idea of acceptable sexual dissent can be.

The father/son dynamic that structured part of *Project Grizzly’s* masculine narrative becomes, in *Murderball*, more explicit and central to its illustration of the conflictive transmission of normative masculinity. Joe’s son, Robert, is soft-spoken and sensitive, gets excellent grades, plays the viola and –much to his father’s thinly disguised disappointment– seems uninterested in either sports or violence. He speaks admiringly of his father, but complains about having to dust the shelves of his “trophy wall”. The film articulates the heavy toll Soares’s

12. The film includes excerpts from the bizarrely-titled hospital video “Sexuality Reborn: Sexuality Following Spinal Cord Injury”, a rather cheesy and unintentionally hilarious piece –perhaps the closest *Murderball* comes to an ironic distancing from its subject.

13. Women’s roles in most other areas shown in the film seem to be also secondary, barely acknowledged (Leader 2006: 5-6), and largely supportive of aggressive masculinity.

obsession with competition, discipline and success takes on his family life and, most crucially, his own health. The paternal conflict and its apparent resolution are, however, handled in a rather formulaic way: the severe father undergoes a (partial) conversion after suffering a heart attack; he matures, at least according to his sisters; and a later scene has him flying back home early from a match to proudly attend his son's school-concert performance –a veritable staple of family film drama. *Murderball* provides, without much questioning, what looks like a premature and profoundly unconvincing closure. Robert's deviation from hegemonic masculinity is contained by the reification of talent and its incorporation into the ethics of competitive-based accomplishment –the boy's own school awards are eventually allowed some space on his father's shrine. The validation is reinforced by means of an explicit link with enduring narratives of the US national imagination: the ethos of individualism, hard work and thrift, the American dream, and the contribution of the immigrant experience.

US/Canadian rivalry becomes again the major focus of attention at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens. Both teams fail in their quest for gold, but this only leads to a strengthening of the framework of commercial competitive sport, which is never subjected to any significant interrogation either on the part of the filmmakers or of those most directly involved. Even more troubling is the documentary's (quite literally) last-minute showcasing of a quad rugby demonstration for disabled Iraq war 'veterans'. Given the brevity and unexpectedness of this epilogue, it is hard to determine with certainty what its import might be. In a different film, the opportunity would be taken to acknowledge the existence –and supremacy– of a socio-cultural apparatus that sanctions both the sport's ideology of aggression and domination, and a murderous imperialistic adventure based on precisely those values. *Murderball* excludes further context, does not recognise any explicit link other than the one observed (quad rugby as one possible passage back into civilian life) and refuses open commentary.

The film is obviously not without its merits (considerable technical adroitness, a keen sense of rhythm and structure) and it contains some honestly moving moments and inspirational stories. Its examination of hegemonic masculinity is, however, ultimately unsatisfactory. Many of the fissures are brought to the surface –the anxious recovery and reinscription of the wounded male body, masculinity's unstable link with nationhood, the tensions of transmission– only to be rapidly, and sloppily, sutured. This might suggest the particular weight, in the current North American context, of a certain (officially encouraged) movement back to traditional, unabashedly aggressive forms of masculinity. But this recent backlash is not altogether uncontested and could prove short-lived.

What these texts illustrate is the increasing pressure to face the constructedness of masculinities, their fractures and effects, as well as the vagaries of documentary representation and the collapse of previously firm reality/fiction

dichotomies. The three films focus on hyperbolic instantiations of hegemonic masculinity, a choice that risks diverting attention from its more 'ordinary' embodiments or that could often result in the containment of outrage through safe gestures of derision. Despite their failings, however, they demonstrate that documentary can also have a role in deconstructing normative masculine identities. They constitute, in any case, only a small sample of a corpus not yet fully explored by either masculinity or documentary studies. With this in mind, it is to be hoped that comprehensive analyses of masculinity will also find a more regular place for critical contribution within the larger field of gender studies.

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